A Defense of Fisherman

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To a Fisherman who
wants not to be de-
feated, with the good-
will and affectionate
wishes of the Author.

A DEFENSE OF FISHERMEN

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BY

Grover Cleveland

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LX Exemplaria
In Usum Amicorum

A Defense of Fishermen

BY way of introduction and explanation it should be said that there is no intention at this time to deal with those who fish for a livelihood. Those sturdy and hard-working people need no vindication or defense. Our concern is with those who fish because they have an occult and mysterious instinct which leads them to love it, because

they court the healthful, invigorating exertion it invites, and because its indulgence brings them in close contact and communion with Nature's best and most elevating manifestations. This sort of fishing is pleasure and not work—sport and not money-grabbing. Therefore it is contemptuously regarded in certain quarters as no better than a waste of time. Generous fishermen cannot fail to look with pity upon the benighted persons who have no better conception than this of the uses and beneficent objects of rational diversion. In these sad and ominous days of mad fortune-chasing, every patriotic, thoughtful citizen, whether he fishes or not, should lament that we have not among our countrymen more fishermen. There can be no doubt that the promise of industrial peace, of contented labor and of healthful moderation in the pursuit of wealth, in this democratic country of ours, would be infinitely improved if a large share of the time which has been devoted to the concoction of trust and business combinations had been spent in fishing.

The narrow and ill-conditioned people who snarlingly count all fishermen as belonging to the lazy and good-for-nothing class, and who take satisfaction in

describing an angler's outfit as a contrivance with a hook at one end and a fool at the other, have been so thoroughly discredited that no one could wish for their more irredeemable submersion. Statesmen, judges, clergymen, lawyers and doctors, as well as thousands of other outspoken members of the fishing fraternity, have so effectively given the lie to these revilers of an honest and conscientious brotherhood that they are glad to find refuge in ignominious silence.

Notwithstanding this, weak, piping voices are still occasionally heard accusing fishermen of certain shortcomings and faults. These are so unsubstantial and unimportant that, as against the high place in the world's esteem claimed by those who love to fish, they might well be regarded as non essentials, or, in a phrase of the day, as mere matters of detail. But, although it may be true that these charges are unworthy of notice, it cannot be expected that fishermen, proud of the name, will be amiably willing to permit those making such accusations the satisfaction of remaining unchallenged.

At the outset, the fact should be recognized that the community of fishermen constitute a separate class or a sub-race among the inhabitants of the earth. It has

sometimes been said that fishermen are born and not made. This is true to the extent that nothing can supply the lack of certain inherent, constitutional, and inborn qualities or traits which are absolutely necessary to a fisherman's make-up. Of course there are many who call themselves fishermen and who insist upon their membership in the fraternity who have not in their veins a drop of legitimate fisherman blood. Their self-asserted relationship is nevertheless sometimes seized upon by malicious or ignorant critics as permitting the assumption that the weaknesses and sins of these pretenders are the weaknesses and sins of genuine fishermen; but in truth they are only interlopers who have learned a little fish language, who love to fish only "when they bite," who whine at bad luck, who betray incredulity when they hear a rousing fish story, and who do or leave undone many other things fatal to good and regular standing. They are like certain whites called squaw-men, who hang about Indian reservations, and gain certain advantages in the tribes by marrying full-blooded Indian women. Surely no just person would for a moment suppose that genuine Indians could be treated fairly by measuring them according to a squaw-man standard. Neither can genuine fishermen be fairly

treated by judging them according to the standards presented by squaw-fishermen.

In point of fact, full-blooded fishermen whose title is clear, and whose natural qualifications are undisputed, have ideas, habits of thought and mental tendencies so personally and especially their own, and their beliefs and code of ethics are so exclusively fitted to their needs and surroundings, that an attempt on the part of strangers to speak or write concerning the character or conduct of its approved membership savors of imprudent presumption. None but fishermen can properly deal with these delicate matters.

What sense is there in the charge of laziness sometimes made against true fishermen? Laziness has no place in the constitution of a man who starts at sunrise and tramps all day with only a sandwich to eat, floundering through bushes and briers and stumbling over rocks or wading streams in pursuit of elusive trout. Neither can a fisherman who, with rod in hand, sits in a boat or on a bank all day be called lazy — provided he attends to his fishing and is physically and mentally alert in his occupation. This charge may perhaps be truthfully made against squaw-fishermen who become easily discouraged,

who "tire and faint" early, and lie down under the shade to sleep, or go in swimming, or who gaze about or read a book while their hooks rest baitless on the bottom; but how false and unfair it is to accuse regular, full-blooded fishermen of laziness, based on such performances as these! And yet this is absurdly done by those who cannot tell a reel from a compass, and who by way of familiarizing themselves with their topic leave their beds at eight o'clock in the morning, ride to an office at ten, sit at a desk until three or perhaps five, with an hour's interval for a hearty luncheon, and go home in the proud belief that they had done an active, hard day's work. Fishermen find no fault with what they do in their own affairs, nor with their conception of work; but they do insist that such people have no right to impute laziness to those who fish.

It is sometimes said that there is such close relationship between mendacity and fishing, that in matters connected with their craft all fishermen are untruthful. It must, of course, be admitted that large stories of fishing adventure are sometimes told by fishermen — and why should this not be so? Beyond all question there is no sphere of human activity so full of strange and

wonderful incidents as theirs. Fish are constantly doing the most mysterious and startling things; and no one has yet been wise enough to explain their ways or account for their conduct. The best fishermen do not attempt it, they move and strive in the atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty, constantly aiming to reach results without a clue, and through the cultivation of faculties non-existent or inoperative in the common mind. In these circumstances fishermen necessarily see and do wonderful things. If those not members of the brotherhood are unable to assimilate the recital of these wonders, it is because their believing apparatus has not been properly regulated and stimulated. Such disability falls very short of justifying doubt as to the truth of the narration. The things narrated have been seen and experienced with a fisherman's eyes and perceptions. This is perfectly understood by listening fishermen; and they, to their enjoyment and education, are permitted to believe what they hear.

This faculty is one of the safest signs of full-blooded right to membership. If incredulity is intimated by a professed member no injustice will be done if he is at once put under suspicion as a squaw-fisherman. As to

non-members who accuse true fishermen of falsehood, it is perfectly clear that they are utterly unfitted to deal with the subject. Upon this theory any story of personal experience told by a fisherman is to the fishing apprehension indubitably true; and, since disbelief in other quarters is owing to the lack of this apprehension, the folly of accusing fishermen of habitual untruthfulness is quite apparent.

The position thus taken by the brotherhood requires that they stand solidly together in all circumstances. Tarpon fishing has added greatly to our responsibilities. Even larger fish than these may, with the extension of American possessions, fall within the treatment of American fishermen. As in all past emergencies, we shall be found sufficient in such future exigencies. All will go well if, without a pretense of benevolent assimilation, we still fish as is our wont, and continue our belief in all our brethren declare they have done or can do. A few thousand years ago the question was impressively asked, "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?" We must not falter if, upon its repetition in the future, a brother replies: "Yes, with a ten ounce rod;" nor even if another declares he has already landed one of

these monsters. If American institutions are found adequate to the new tasks which Destiny has put upon them in the extension of our lands, the American Chapter of the world's fishermen must not fail to subdue by their time honored methods and practices, and by continued truthfulness in narration of adventure, any new difficulties presented by the extension of our waters.

Before leaving this branch of our subject, especial reference should be made to one item more conspicuous, perhaps, than any other, among those comprised in the general charge of fishermen's mendacity. It is constantly said that they greatly exaggerate the size of the fish that are lost. This accusation, though most frequently and flippantly made, is in point of fact based upon the most absurd arrogance and a love of slanderous assertion that passes understanding. These are harsh words; but they are abundantly justified.

In the first place, all the presumptions are with the fisherman's contention. It is perfectly plain that large fish are more apt to escape than small ones. Their weight and activity, combined with the increased trickiness and resourcefulness of age and experience, of course, greatly increase their ability to tear out the hook, and

enhance the danger that their antics will expose a fatal weakness in the hook, leader, line or rod. Another presumption which must be regretfully mentioned arises from the fact that in many cases it is the encounter with the large fish which causes such excitement, and such distraction or perversion of judgment, as leads the fisherman to do the wrong thing or fail to do the right thing at the critical instant — thus actually and effectively contributing to an escape which could not and would not have occurred except in favor of a large fish.

Beyond these presumptions we have the deliberate and simple story of the fisherman himself, giving with the utmost sincerity all the details of his misfortune, and indicating the length of the fish he has lost, or giving in pounds his exact weight. Now why should this statement be discredited? It is made by one who struggled with the escaped fish. Perhaps he saw it. This, however, is not important, for he certainly felt it on his rod, and he knows precisely how his rod behaves in the emergency of every conceivable strain.

All true fishermen who listen to his plain, unvarnished tale accept with absolute faith the declared length and weight of the fish that was almost caught; and with

every presumption, besides positive statement, against them, carping outsiders who cannot fish, and who love to accuse fishermen of lying, are exposed in an attempt to originate or perpetuate an envious and malicious libel.

The case of our fraternity on this point of absolute and exact truthfulness is capable of such irrefragable demonstration that anything in the way of confession and avoidance ought to be considered inadmissible. And yet simply for the sake of argument, or by way of curious speculation, it may be interesting to intimate how a variation of a few inches in the exact length or a few ounces in the exact weight of a lost fish, as given by the loser, may be accounted for, without attributing to him intentional falsehood. The theory has been recently started that a trained hunting dog points a bird in the field solely because the bird's scent creates a hypnotic influence on the dog which impels him by a sort of suggestion to direct his nose toward the spot from which such scent emanates. If there is anything worth considering in this theory why may not a struggling fish at the end of a line exert such hypnotic influence on the intensely excited and receptive nature at the other extremity of the fishing

outfit as to suggest an arbitrary and independent statement of the dimensions of the hypnotizer?

With the accusations already mentioned it would certainly seem that the enmity of those who revile fishermen and their ways should be satisfied. They have not been content, however, in the demonstration of their evil-mindedness without adding to their indictment against the brotherhood the charge of profanity. Of course, they have not the hardihood to allege that our profanity is of that habitual and low sort which characterizes the coarse and ill-bred, who offend all decent people by constantly interlarding their speech with fearful and irrelevant oaths. They, nevertheless, find sufficient excuse for their accusation in the sudden ejaculations, outwardly resembling profanity, which are occasionally wrung from fishermen in trying crises and in moments of soul-straining unkindness of Fate.

Now this question of profanity is largely one of intention and deliberation. The man who, intending what he says, coolly indulges in imprecation, is guilty of an offense that admits of no excuse or extenuation; but a fisherman can hardly be called profane who, when overtaken without warning by disaster, and abruptly

hurled from the exhilarating heights of delightful anticipation to the depths of dire disappointment, impulsively gives vent to his pent-up emotion by the use of a word which, though found in the list of oaths, is spoken without intentional imprecation and because nothing else seems to suit the occasion. It is by no means to be admitted that fishing tends even to this semblance of profanity. On the contrary, it imposes a self-restraint and patient forbearance upon its advanced devotees which tend to prevent sudden outbursts of feeling.

It must in frankness be admitted, however, by fishermen of every degree, that when the largest trout of the day winds the leader about a snag and escapes after a long struggle, or when a large salmon or bass, apparently fatigued to a point of non-resistance, suddenly, by an unexpected and vicious leap, frees himself from the hook, the fisherman's code of morals will not condemn beyond forgiveness the holder of the straightened rod if he impulsively, but with all the gentility at his command, exclaims "Damn that fish!" It is probably better not to speak at all, but if strong words are to be used perhaps these will serve as well as any that can do justice to the occasion.

Uncle Toby, overcome with tender sympathy, swore with an unctious, rotund oath, that his sick friend should not die; and we are told that "the accusing spirit which flew up to heaven's chancery with the oath blushed as he gave it in; and the recording angel as he wrote it down dropped a tear upon the word and blotted it out forever."

The defense of the fishing fraternity which has been here attempted is by no means as completely stated as it should be. Nor should the world be allowed to overlook the admirable affirmative qualities which exist among genuine members of the brotherhood, and the useful traits which an indulgence in the gentle art cultivates and fosters. A recital of these, with a description of the personal peculiarities found in the ranks of fishermen and the influence of these peculiarities on success or failure, are necessary to a thorough vindication of those who worthily illustrate the virtues of our clan.

The End

I the PRINTER *make hearty acknowledgment of my debt to the* AUTHOR (*which I shall never be able fully to discharge*) *in assigning to his use twenty copies of this book* (*of whose printing he is unwitting*). *To* MR. LORIMER *I* [illegible] *copies. I make further acknowledgement of my indebtedness to the alphabetical allotment of one copy each to the* [illegible] *of their titles and without their permission*).

GEORGE A. ARMOUR, *referred to by Vergil in the famous line: "Armour virum te cano,"*

STOCKTON AXSON, *a good judge of piscatorial and other fiction,*

EDGAR A. BANCROFT, *warden of Western game stories,*

JOHN B[illegible]YDEN, *who taught me all I knew about fishing until I met the Author,*

W. C. BROWN, *who fishes best with telegraph poles and trunk lines,*

V. Lansing Collins, *who knows all that is writ of things in heaven and earth and in the waters under the earth,*

George B. Cortelyou, *a master of the seine,*

John P. Cushing, *who has spoiled many a rod and spared many a child,*

J. H. Eckels, *a comptroller of the currency of brooks,*

H. B. Fine, *maker of lines that neither tangle nor break,*

J. Hambidge *and* Peter MacArthur, *who best know my failings as a fisherman,*

Laurence Hutton, *who masks all our faults with his charity,*

Joseph Jefferson, *thanking him for the loan of "five shillings" and divers other favors,*

Daniel S. Lamont, *who has pass-keys to Eden,*

George Lawrence, *with whom I have often angled not for fun but for funds,*

W. F. Magie, *warden of the morals of Princeton fishermen, children and students,*

Junius S. Morgan, *who hath taken many leviathans with a book,*

Bliss Perry, *though he makes the Atlantic a* mare clausum *for some of us,*

M. Taylor Pyne, *a friend to the man who needs one,*

W. B. Scott, *an expert in fossil fishing,*

Henry van Dyke, *who has familiarity with all persuasive arts,*

Andrew F. West, *who like the disciple Andrew discovers those with loaves and fishes,*

Jesse Lynch Williams, *whose "Stolen Stories" and others, are the best of bait,*

Woodrow Wilson, *the kindliest and best beloved of those who correct the mendacity of others,*

And one copy to myself in spite of whose efforts there are just as many good fish in the sea as there were before I began to fish.

F.